

EDITORIAL

The Christian Mind and the Work Ethic

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The attitude of the Christian toward the larger question of work as it exists in a technological society is in need of continual revision and progressive sharpening. Our culture is experiencing an internal struggle—almost an internal trauma—at this point, because of the phenomenal advances of technology. In practical terms, these advances raise the level of employability much more quickly than our abilities for job training or job retraining can match.

It is a truism that the ‘work ethic’ is under fire from many quarters. Most visible is of course the rejection by the alienated generation of (as the cliché runs) “a goal-oriented, success oriented, work oriented” life style. Part, but not all, of this can be attributed to a hedonistic desire of “each to do his own thing,” which of course resists the necessity for performing anything but “relevant” work. This latter sentiment represents of course a pampered attitude which resists the inevitable discipline involved in the performance of much of the world’s work.

There are, however, deeper problems. We would suggest, as a model for analysis, the following formula: our work ethic combines a principle of life, written deeply into the constitution of things, with a number of pragmatic variables. The principle is, that work is one of the “orders” of creation, a divinely instituted ingredient of human existence. Work was evidently a donation of the Creator to the first human pair prior to the Fall. Man’s disobedience altered the quality and tempo of work, but not the instituted donation itself.

The culture-originated variables are many. Pioneer life made its contribution in the form of the maxim, “He that does not work shall not eat.” The so-called Puritan ethic added the formula, often not articulated, but

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there nevertheless, that the person who succeeds in his work is enjoying a special blessing of God. The consumer-oriented society has added certain 'refining' features, such as that growing out of the belief that production is a value (perhaps the major value, as witnessed by the stress upon an expanding GNP). Thus, the jobless person seems to fail to contribute to production, and by the same failure, not only loses the rewards of this, but breaks down in his role as a high-level consumer.

This has led to the situation in which the jobless not only fall behind in the competition for goods and services, but also fall short in meeting ego-needs. Thus, the older view concerning the inevitable bond between working and eating is given a slight twist, but its major thrust remains.

Again, our society tends to view work in utilitarian terms, and to give too little place to the more creative forms of human endeavor. The unconventionality of the life styles of many artists, and their attempt to shock the 'established society' has no doubt contributed to the distrust of many forms of non-contractual work.

Our society recognizes, with part of its mind, that there needs to be a fairly stable relationship between one's daily work and his daily bread; but with the other part, it applauds the person who is able to make a prudential provision for the future through the acquisition of investments and endowments, which in turn repay without any visible expenditure of effort. Resistance to programs which would place a floor beneath the income of families who, often through no fault of their own (due to geographic shifts of employment opportunities and lack of family mobility) are without employment, comes most frequently from those who live by interest and dividends.

Perhaps enough has been said to expose some of the problems which confront the mind of the Christian as he views the work ethic in the light of today's predicament, particularly in technological America. Now, most Christians agree that there is such a thing as "a theology of work," this centering in the view that work is given to man within a context of a loving providence. They see also that man's Fall has disturbed many of the ideal factors relating to work. Christians and non-Christians agree further that man's life is incomplete without the possibility of the performance of work which is both reasonably rewarding and in some sense psychologically satisfying.

The advance of a technological society has placed strains upon the entire question of work, but especially as it related to the *right* of every individual to work. This involves, of course, the corollary obligation of a society to provide the conditions within which work is available as a fulfillment of that right. As more jobs are removed from human hands and as the level of employability becomes (allegedly at least) higher and higher, it is the poor, the unskilled, and the lower income segment which are hardest hit.

It is the conviction of this writer that while we must retain the basic

principle underlying the work ethic, there is urgent need for the Christian Church, and especially its Evangelical wing, to engage in some hard thinking at the point of the cultural and sociological variables which surround it. John Wesley placed great stress upon “working all you can” in order to earn and to give and to save as much as possible. This is still good advice—if you are white, and skilled, and located in areas in which employment is readily available. But if one or more of these elements is lacking, what then?

A society which rests, in much of its economy, upon planned obsolescence (let us call it by its name, *waste*) and has for one of its most conspicuous symbols the automobile graveyard, certainly ought not shrink from making at least emergency provision for those who are, through no fault of their own, left behind in the race for employability.

It goes without saying that larger public responsibility will need to be taken for the training of those often thought to be “untrainable” or “unemployable”. There may be need for the creation of temporary, artificial forms of employment for those who simply cannot move quickly to areas of higher employment potential. There seems to be necessity for long-term programs for the removal of hard-core unemployment (and resultant hard-core poverty) which will involve large fiscal cost. These may involve false starts and the type of inefficiencies which grow out of bold experiments in the untried.

What needs to be stressed here, it seems, is that Evangelicals will need to resist the temptation to be the first to oppose such plans, and the last to remove their resistance. Those who profess perfect love can ill afford to be the last to advocate and practice Christian compassion to the victims (whether willing or unwilling) of hard-core employment situations. Certainly there is desperate need here for the humanizing thrust of *agape*, of the compassion which can throw its arms around all those for whom Christ died.

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